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FINDING YOUR WAY

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## YOU AND PEACE CORPS IN NEPAL

by

Lynn Knauff

If you depend on concrete signs of achievement for your satisfaction in life, you may be in for trouble in Nepal. Don't expect many changes in two years. Don't even think that you've got the answers about how Nepal ought to be changed. Your challenge here is to do your assignment well and to continue doing it even when you are unable to see results. Your satisfaction must be found in the work itself and in the knowledge that as one of several generations of Peace Corps Volunteers here and elsewhere you are little by little adding to the capability of people to achieve peace, equality, justice and a fair share of requirements for a good life.

The qualities most needed by Peace Corps Volunteers in Nepal are resilience, self-reliance, sensitivity and empathy. Without them, it is hardly possible to get beyond the surface of Nepalese life. And for an American, that surface is not always pleasant. Volunteers with the capacities to recover from disappointment and defeat, stand on their own, and sense and share the feelings of the Nepalese, come to feel some of what lies beneath.

Except for Kathmandu, which stands alone in the range of its facilities but where few volunteers are stationed, nearly all of the hill sites and many of the Tarai sites where volunteers live and work in Nepal are remote. In most cases, getting to the hill sites involves long treks over difficult terrain; getting to the tarai sites is less arduous but sometimes still a difficult task. But this type of remoteness may be no problem at all. Most of the sites (other than Kathmandu) are remote in more troublesome ways. In most of them there live few if any Westerners other than volunteers (of which there are usually not more than one in a small village). There are no commercial entertainment facilities available. There are virtually no possibilities for dating. There are few English speaking people. There is little opportunity for Western varieties of intellectual stimulation. Except in the Tarai and Kathmandu, there is a pronounced lack of variety in the kinds of food available. And the simple mechanics of daily life, like getting water, buying food, bathing, and washing clothes--things that you probably never even notice at home--are time-consuming chores. You are expected to be clean, well-

24 AUG 1982

groomed and neatly dressed so you've got to mobilize the energy and make the time for these tasks.

Further, although Nepal is a land of fantastic natural beauty, some of its villages are not. They are filled with sights, smells, tastes and attitudes that are new and often difficult for Americans. Whether, how long, and to what extent they stay that way for you as a Volunteer here depends largely on your resilience, self-reliance, sensitivity and empathy. If you lack these qualities, you can expect at least occasionally, and maybe more than that, to feel frustrated in your assignment, bored with your existence, and painfully isolated and lonely. Moreover, without these qualities, you may spend the larger part of two years here being destructively critical and generally angry.

So why come to Nepal? Briefly, because there is a worthwhile contribution that you can make here. And because, in the course of making it--or trying to--you will have the opportunity to find in yourself resources that you never knew you had and to become personally and emotionally involved with and committed to the lives of other people to a degree that will enrich your own life. If you make the most of that opportunity, you will not only perform a useful piece of work but will also come to know well the rich culture and fine people of Nepal.

One further word about self-reliance: The Peace Corps staff is here to give the volunteer constructive support, and we think we do. But we are few, distances here are measured in days and the volunteers are spread from West to East and North to South. As a volunteer, you will have to manage the details of daily life on your own. On the job, your immediate boss will be a Nepalese supervisor, and it will be your supervisor rather than us to whom you will report directly. If you have job-related problems, he is your first line of recourse, and his innate politeness is likely to leave you wondering fairly often just what he wants you to do. As a volunteer, learning to work effectively with your supervisor is part of your job, and you must do most of it entirely on your own. There are all kinds of ways in which we can and will provide you with support. But all of it must be performed in ways that preserve and enhance your relationship with your Nepalese supervisor and the relationship of the Peace Corps in Nepal with His Majesty's Government. Your best support in daily life and on the job will be yourself.

BEST DOCUMENT AVAILABLE



## CULTURAL CUES AND CLUES

by

Peace Corps Nepal Staff

"... it will not be easy. None of you will earn a salary. You will live at the same level as the citizens of the country to which you are being sent. You'll do the same work, eat the same food, and speak the same language."

--John Kennedy, 1961

When learning how to fit into a new culture and speak a new language, your best moves are to observe, mimic, practice. Every day and everywhere, you will be in constant contact with new gestures, idioms and expressions. Your willingness to tune into them is directly related to how much you invite yourself to hear, see, and perceive. During training, you will be encouraged to explore and experiment with new behaviors and you will be learning Nepali. With exposure after exposure through stumbling, fumbling, wondering and blundering, you can--depending on you--begin to feel accepted, acceptable and accepting.

People can learn new ways to talk, dress, eat, bathe, go to the bathroom, and perform other everyday tasks. What is difficult is feeling comfortable with the reactions you elicit from Nepalis. For example, here are some reactions and behaviors that are normal and acceptable in Nepal, but that we consider either rude or a response only to those we know well:

- staring
- talking about a person indirectly in the presence of that person
- asking to borrow or to be given things
- asking the cost of something or the amount of your salary
- asking your age and if you are married
- men wanting to hold hands with men
- coming into a room without knocking
- interrupting conversations
- disregarding privacy
- stroking the hair on your arms

No amount of intellectual understanding of why these things are done or tolerance for a different standard of good manners make it easy to be bombarded by these differences every day. For you to find different ways to gain support from this family- and caste-oriented society takes patience, good humor, a large measure of self-awareness, and a willingness to experiment and to learn from Nepali friends and families.

Nepalese find that many of the customs and behaviors we bring here are in conflict with or, at least, not congruent with Nepali traditions and expectations. People are different, of course, so that the intensity of reactions vary. But, be prepared for some response to the following:

- our use of a handkerchief instead of blowing mucous  
out onto the ground
- our need for privacy, private space and time alone
- our individualism
- our seeming sexual freedom
- our practice of "dutch treat"
- nudity
- our enjoyment of candy and other sweet food
- our not being married (most of us aren't)
- our wanting to live in Nepal instead of America  
(where everything is available)
- not thoroughly cleansing our face and hands and  
cleaning out chest and nasal mucous before the  
morning meal
- left-handedness

The responses to these behaviors that we have and don't have emerge from religious and familiar/caste traditions. Nepal's many villages and castes make it most difficult to generalize about do's and don't's; therefore, the following discussion is intended to serve as a preliminary guide until you discover more fully for yourself what is acceptable among the villagers you'll be living with.

Both Americans and Nepalese feel that they have a highly developed regard for individual cleanliness, but convention plays a large part in determining who and what are clean. A number of western habits seem unsanitary to many Nepalese; for example, sitting in the dirty water of a bathtub, using dry toilet paper, carrying around and using a soiled handkerchief, eating without having taken an early-morning bath, and even shaking hands.

Ritual purity, however, where more than cleanliness is involved, is a more sensitive matter than sanitation. The avoidance of contamination or pollution affects many areas of Nepali life.

Reverence for animal life has relegated butchers and

shoemakers to a very low social position in Nepal, and contact with shoes is generally considered defiling or degrading. A shoe-beating is one of the most humiliating forms of punishment. People of status may not want to polish their own shoes or be seen carrying them to a repair shop. For foreigners, an extremely important recommendation is that they keep their shod feet on the floor or ground. If you put your feet up on chairs, tables, beds or train benches, first take off your shoes, and do not point your feet toward or expose the soles of your feet to anyone. Always remove your shoes before entering a temple or mosque. Some people leave their shoes at the door, others remove them before entering certain parts of the homes such as kitchen, dining area, and worship room. If you accidentally touch anything with your shoes, be sure to apologize profusely.

Hindus are particularly sensitive about the pollution of food when it is touched by anyone outside their caste or religion. When in a bazaar, do not touch any displayed cooked foods such as sweets. Fruit and raw vegetables can be handled without causing offense. When drinking from a water container used by others, avoid touching your lips to it. In a Nepali home it is best not to help yourself from a common dish of food but instead to wait for it to be served to you. Don't serve leftovers to your guests or offer a person anything from which you have taken a bite or sip.

The left hand is another source of pollution, and understandably so since it is used with water as we use toilet paper. When eating with your fingers, use only the right hand. Whenever possible, you should also use the right hand for giving and accepting things. If a gift is too big for one hand, both may be used, but never the left alone. In more formal situations, both hands are used in giving or receiving an object. A gift accidentally dropped in giving is often taken to be grudgingly given and to be bad luck for the receiver.

Women during their periods are considered unclean in much of Hindu society. They usually do not take part in social gatherings or in preparing food, and they avoid touching plants or other living things. So a western woman should avoid drawing attention to her own menses and one should not press a man for details if he says his wife is 'not well.'

Americans should be aware that Nepalese have less casually defined concepts of friendship and hospitality than is often true for us. When a Nepali feels that friendship has been established, he is likely to assume the privileges of a friend; that is, to drop in without advance notice, to sit around at length and talk or read your books and magazines, to stay for meals, and to ask for occasional favors such as advice and assistance in getting to the United States for a visit or study.

If you consider such behavior to be an imposition, great tact will be required in order to avoid misunderstandings. As a result of differences in customs, Nepalese may feel that Americans are insincere in their initial friendliness.

A visitor may announce his arrival at your door with a cough or by ringing his cycle bell or he may just walk inside if the front door is unlocked. When someone drops in unexpectedly always invite him in and offer a seat, no matter how busy you are, unless you are deliberately trying to break off relations with the person. Remember that it is difficult to give advance notice with the scarcity of phones and the difficulties of transportation and communication.

Always offer your visitor something to eat or drink. If nothing else is available, provide at least a glass of water with apologies. Tea is usually served, always accompanied with hot milk and sugar, which are usually added and stirred by the host. Other snacks such as biscuits and sweets may be kept on hand for unexpected visitors. If your visitor initially declines the tea and food you offer, try again. Politeness may be the reason for the refusal. You, too, will be directly affected by this custom when you decline food.

Do not be surprised if your invited guests arrive late. In Nepal people live less by the clock than in America, but generalizations in this matter are dangerous and until you learn to predict expectations, it is probably best to be punctual in most of your own engagements.

At social gatherings, be prepared to be asked to sing a song but wait for Nepalis to sing first so you can gauge the appropriateness of your participation and the type of song that will be enjoyed by your audience. At public ceremonies and performances including ones at which you may be speaking, don't be offended by the casual attitude shown by the audience. Strict silence is seldom demanded at such functions, and members of the audience often feel free to walk in and out during the program. If garlanded at a public function, the garlanded person may remove the garland from his neck as a sign of humility.

One more important cultural difference for newcomers to keep in mind is that "thank you" is not usually directly expressed. One should not assume that a person is ungrateful because he receives courtesies or gifts silently or with a simple namaste gesture.

## DON'T LAY ANY TRIPS ON NEPAL

You want to be a sadhu. You would like to spend a month in meditation at Bodhi Gaya while Nepali farmers are planting rice and students are attending classes. Spending two years climbing Nepal's highest peaks is a life-long ambition. You would like solitude in which to read all of the books that you have never had time to read. You want to forget the world of appearance, let your hair and beard grow naturally and just be happy in your favorite grungy clothes. You would like to do the drug trip in a cheap and paranoid-free situation. You need a long vacation. You want to get involved in someone else's revolution. You want to do research for a graduate degree on Nepal. There is a job that you want to do in Nepal but it doesn't fit into any of the Peace Corps job descriptions.

Whatever you really want to do--do it, be totally independent, use your own resources, and be responsible to no organization. One word of advice: be sensitive to how what you are doing is affecting the lives of those around you, and one word of warning: don't plan on doing your own thing at the expense of either Peace Corps or Nepal. If it makes you angry to be thought of as someone who is out to take Nepal for a ride, I am not referring to you, but to a few who have done just that in the past and have left some villages in Nepal with a very bad impression of Peace Corps Volunteers. You may at times have to overcome the bad impressions left behind in an office, school, or village. You may have to overcome a negative image of Americans that has been created by foreigners, not necessarily Peace Corps and not necessarily even American. Among other things you may have to deal with the influence of tourism if you are posted along a favorite trekking route or in the Kathmandu Valley.

You can never be a Nepali. You can never meet all of their expectations. You will make many blunders. Some of your mistakes will be an education for you and your Nepali friends alike. You will want to share with them new and alternative ways of living and working. You will want to present options in such a way that villagers may feel free to make their own choice whether to accept or reject what you propose without losing your respect or friendship. Whatever you do be honest with yourself about what you are doing. If after persistent effort, you decide that you really can not find personal satisfaction in being a health worker, teacher, or bridge builder, don't become one of the people who makes it difficult for anyone to follow in your place. If you decide to quit Peace Corps, leave with

the satisfaction that you tried your best, that sometimes our best is not enough, or what was really needed was something that you really did not have to give. Leave with dignity and honor, for Nepalese will remember you for your personal qualities, for what you tried to do, not for your mistakes; just don't lay any trips on Nepal.





**END**

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